Border and immigration workers strike at Australian airports and ports

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Australian Department of Immigration and Border Force (DIBP) personnel, mostly members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), joined 24-hour stoppages from last Thursday. The union staggered the strikes over three days, affecting international airports, ports and other sites across the country.

The DIBP stoppages are part of a long-running enterprise agreement campaign involving over 100,000 federal public sector workers across a range of departments. The previous agreements expired in 2014, which means that, apart from cost-cutting enterprise deals signed in a few government departments, the vast majority of CPSU members have had no pay increase for three years.

During this time, the union has reduced its pay claim from a 4 percent increase per year over three years to between 2.5 percent and 3 percent.

Last week's rolling stoppages came after the CPSU called off scheduled strikes by Border Force workers last April, following a Fair Work Commission (FWC) injunction banning all industrial action. The FWC acted on an application by the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, which claimed the strike posed a "threat to national security."

The application was made under section 424 of Australia's industrial laws, which were introduced by the previous Labor government with the full support of the unions. The FWC, or the federal industrial relations minister, can prohibit any industrial action deemed to "threaten to endanger the life, the personal safety or health or the welfare of the population or part of it."

It was the second time "national security" had been invoked to shut down industrial action by DIBP workers. In March, the CPSU called off planned 24-hour stoppages following a request by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull after bombings that month in Brussels, Belgium. The union's agreement to end industrial action on so-called national security grounds established a new anti-democratic precedent that will be used against other workers in key industries.

The Liberal-National Coalition government has offered public sector workers nominal 2 precent annual pay increases, conditional on workers accepting the loss of hard-won conditions.

For DIBP staff, the government's "offer" involves eliminating multiple allowances, which could leave some workers $8,000 a year worse off, and scrapping various entitlements and arrangements, including access to flexible work hours.

In July 2015, when the government merged the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service and the Department of Immigration to create the DIBP, it abolished a raft of entitlements, severely reducing workers' take home pay. After DIBP workers struck last year, the government agreed to maintain the former conditions but only until negotiations for new enterprise agreements were completed.

DIBP employees—along with most federal public sector workers, including in Human Services, Employment, Environment, Education, Agriculture, Veteran Affairs, the Australian Tax Office, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Bureau of Statistics—have repeatedly voted down government "offers" and overwhelmingly endorsed campaigns of industrial action.

In line with previous strikes, the CPSU has done everything possible to limit action by DIBP workers and isolate them from other public sector workers. It is seeking to wear them down in order to impose new agreements to meet the government's budget-cutting requirements.

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The government has insisted that any wages settlement will not be backdated. This means that the government, with the CPSU's assistance, has imposed a three-year pay freeze, setting another precedent that will be taken up by employers across the board.

The CPSU has ensured that industrial action by DIBP workers and other public sector workers causes minimal disruption. On August 3, the union directed DIBP staff in 50 areas not to strike. In a statement announcing the exemptions, the union restated its commitment to "national security and safety."

The CPSU's principal concern throughout the dispute—the longest enterprise agreement conflict in the union's history—has been to convince the government that collaboration with the union can best achieve its cost-cutting agenda.

The CPSU called no industrial action during the campaign for the July 2 federal election, while urging its members to vote for Labor as a "lesser evil" to the conservative Coalition. In reality, Labor governments at both state and federal levels have destroyed thousands of public sector jobs over the past three decades.

In 1987, the Hawke Labor government introduced an "efficiency dividend." This measure, imposing annual funding reductions across the public sector, has been used by successive federal administrations to cut jobs and working conditions.

In 2013, the Gillard Labor administration increased the efficiency dividend from 1.25 percent to 1.5 percent, just before the 2013 federal election, clearing the way for the destruction of an estimated 14,500 jobs by the incoming Coalition government.

The narrow re-election of the government has seen the CPSU resume its appeals to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to partner with the union to head off a confrontation. On the eve of last week's strike, CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood said Turnbull could "avert future strike action, including the prospect of broader industrial action across the Commonwealth public sector, by working with us to fix this mess."

The "mess" to which Flood referred was the refusal of the overwhelming majority of public sector workers to accept the government's austerity demands. The CPSU is desperately seeking closer collaboration with the government in order to deliver the deep spending cuts being demanded by the financial and corporate elite.

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